Another day, another hat

by Scott Slavik

There is perhaps no other job that embodies the label of "jack of all trades" more than a being a Ranger at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. On a daily basis my colleagues and I confront a variety of situations which require us to "wear many different hats." Having recently returned from a major wildland fire incident in eastern Oregon, the newest "hat" in my repertoire is a fire helmet, affectionately known as a "bucket."

With our cool wet summer, wildfire hasn't really been on our minds like it was last season when the Fox Creek Fire and King Country Creek Fire burned 36,000 acres of the Kenai Peninsula. However, it's been a very different story in the Lower-48. With almost 9 million acres burned to date, this year has been the worst fire season on record.

When full-time fire fighting resources become stretched too thin to adequately protect life and property, "collateral-duty" fire fighters are made available to assist national firefighting efforts. Twenty-person inter-agency fire crews are formed by combining forces with personnel from other state and federal resource agencies who also maintain a cadre of qualified part-time fire fighters. The summer of 2006 saw a record number of inter-agency crews sent from Alaska to assist national firefighting efforts.

Alaska Interagency Crew #5, as we were called, was comprised of park rangers, wildlife biologists, forest technicians and trail crew workers from the Chugach and Tongass National Forests, Denali National Park and the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. We were a mix of highly skilled full-time fire suppression professionals and "newbies" who were on their first fire assignment. Our crew was assigned to the "Shake Table Complex Fire" on the Malheur National Forest in Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon. During our two week assignment, the fire increased in size to 15,000 acres before we were able to fully establish a line around its perimeter. I guess it's only fair to mention that we were assisted by an additional 1,300 other fire fighters and support personnel.

The tools and tactics used to suppress the fire ranged from primitive and traditional to sophisticated and advanced. At times, digging line with Pulaskis and shovels felt futile, but using heavy equipment in such steep and inaccessible terrain wasn't an option. Drawing water from portable tanks using pumps and hoses seemed archaic, but was vital to cool "hot spots" and extinguish root systems burning deep underground. Our work on the ground wouldn't have been possible without the assistance of air support. A fleet of Black Hawk Helicopters performing "bucket drops" and C-47 Air Tankers dumping retardant kept the fire from jumping our newly constructed line. Technological advancements allowed cutting edge computer "modeling" programs to predict the speed, direction and intensity of the fire based on the availability and types of fuels, topography and weather.

Our temporary home situated in a large inhospitable field of sage brush and thistle was transformed into a functioning village almost overnight. Hundreds of personal tents grouped together by crews began to resemble mini-neighborhoods. One cluster of tents seemed to be arranged in neat rows appearing almost affluent while another jumbled cluster looked as if it must surely house the "riff-raff" of our little community. Alaska Crew #5 claimed some prime real estate near a portable hot water hand washing station and outhouses (but not too close). Location, location, location!

A caterer capable of cranking out nearly 3,000 hot meals a day from the back of a converted horse trailer became our restaurant. Hot showers were available from retrofitted semi-tractor trailers and a cozy little yurt offered laundry service. What looked like a travel trailer was our hospital with a friendly staff and a cure for just about any ailment. Sometime between when I went to sleep on Saturday night and the next morning, a tent was erected for Sunday worship. With all of our basic needs being provided for, the place strangely started to feel "homey." Although, after working 14-16 hour shifts everyday there was very little time to enjoy our community's assets.

Just like "real" neighborhoods, suppressing a large wildfire requires a dynamic group of people with a broad range of skills and abilities to be functional and productive. The impromptu community that is formed around large fires, although temporary, has lasting

benefits. Knowledge is shared, experience is gained, new skills are learned and friendships are formed.

The fire season in the Pacific Northwest has finally started to slow down and I'm sure the sage and thistles are flourishing where our tent city used to be. I've put away my fire helmet for the year and await my next adventure and the opportunity to try on another "hat."

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